

I-Messages and You-Messages

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One of the easiest ways to defuse an interpersonal conflict is to avoid accusatory or [escalatory language](#). One way to do this is by using statements about yourself and your feelings (called "I-messages" because they start with "I feel" or "I felt"), instead of "you-messages," which start with an accusation, such as, "You did this (bad thing)," or, "You are (another bad thing)."

The Upside of I-Messages

In other words, if you say, "I felt let down," rather than, "You broke your promise," you will convey the same information. But you will do so in a way that is less likely to provoke a defensive or hostile reaction from your opponent.

You-messages suggest blame, and encourage the recipient to deny wrong-doing or to blame back. For example, if you say, "You broke your promise," the answer is likely to be, "No, I didn't," which sets you up for a lengthy argument, or, "Well, you did, too," which also continues the conflict.

I-messages simply state a problem, without blaming someone for it. This makes it easier for the other side to help solve the problem, without having to admit that they were wrong (see also [saving face](#)).

Remembering to use I-messages can be difficult, however, because many people are not used to talking about themselves or their feelings (and in some cultures, this would be highly inappropriate).

In addition, when we are in a conflict -- especially an [escalated conflict](#) -- there is a very strong tendency to blame many of one's problems on the other side. So stating the problem in terms of a "you-message" is much more natural, and is more consistent with one's view of the problem. But by making the effort to change one's language, one can also [reframe](#) the way one thinks about the conflict, increasing the likelihood that a resolution can be found.

The Downside of I-Messages

I-messages can be manipulative, and can give the recipient the impression that it is their responsibility to make sure that the other person is always happy. In an interesting essay entitled, "What's Wrong with I-Messages," Jane Bluestein argues that I-messages "are frequently used in ways that produce negative and unwanted results." [1] The problem occurs, Bluestein argues, when we use I-messages to try to control or change someone. For example, if you say, "I feel unhappy when you are late," you are really blaming the other for being late, and trying to get them to change their behavior. The focus of Bluestein's article is on parent-child relationships and communication, where she says that "I-statements make the child responsible for the parents' state of mind and convey the impression to the child that he somehow has the power to control how Mommy and Daddy act and feel." [2] This suggests that power relationships affect the use of I-messages. While equals would probably understand that they are not broadly responsible for the other's state of mind -- but just need to work out a solution to a specific problem -- a child or a person who feels greatly over-powered or out-ranked by another person may not recognize that. So I-messages, while useful in many circumstances, should be used with care regarding

how they are received and interpreted (see [active listening](#)).

[1] Jane Bluestein, "What's Wrong with I-Messages," available online at http://www.nhny.org/i_messages.htm (accessed September 15, 2003).

[2] Ibid.

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Sources of Additional, In-depth Information on this Topic

Additional Explanations of the Underlying Concepts:

Online (Web) Sources

Bluestein, Jane. *What's Wrong with "I-Messages"?*.

Available at: http://66.175.44.246/ece/ece_frameset.html.

This essay argues that I-messages are manipulative and often do more harm than good.

Perry, Susan K. *You'd Better Like "I-Messages" (Or Else!)*.

Available at: <http://www.couplescompany.com/Advice/Mark/Imessages.pdf>.

This essay echoes some of the reservations expressed by Jane Bluestein in her article criticizing I-messages. However, this article also discusses how I-messages can be used effectively between husband and wife or other equal couples.

Offline (Print) Sources

Ury, William L. *Getting Past No: Negotiating With Difficult People*. New York: Bantam Books, January 1, 1993.

This book provides step by step approaches to defusing confrontation and developing creative solutions toward resolving conflicts through negotiation. In particular, it focuses on developing communication skills that facilitate cooperation. I-messages are one of the techniques discussed as a way to get through difficult situations. [Click here for more info](#).

Kirshenbaum, Mira and Charles Foster. *Parent-Teen Breakthrough: The Relationship Approach, Reissue Edition*. New York: Plume, 1995.

This book provides advice and guidance on how to build a respectful and loving relationship between parent and teenager. The book includes sample dialogues and practical suggestions for developing these relationships.

Gordon, Thomas. *Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children*. New York: Three Rivers Press, October 2000.

This recent edition of this classic work on Parent Effectiveness Training teaches parents how to

communicate effectively with their children and how to resolve family conflicts. The book contains a very early (perhaps the earliest) description of I-messages and how they may be used.